



# **CITY OF SUNNYVALE REPORT Heritage Preservation Commission**

**October 4, 2006**

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**SUBJECT: Information Report: Preliminary Assessment of the  
Historic Significance of Onizuka Air Force Station.**

## **REPORT IN BRIEF**

The City of Sunnyvale has been named as the Local Redevelopment Authority (LRA) for planning the redevelopment of Onizuka Air Force Station (AFS). The LRA is the lead agency for the creation of the Reuse Plan, which will serve as a guide for Onizuka AFS's closure, transfer, and reuse. In January 2007 the Heritage Preservation Commission's role will be asked to make a recommendation to the LRA on the potential historic significance of the base. This is an information only report, to provide the HPC with information about the significance of the site.

## **BACKGROUND**

Onizuka Air Force Station (AFS) is located at 1080 Innovation Way, Sunnyvale, CA 94089; located off of Mathilda Avenue just north of State Route 237 and U.S. 101. Onizuka is reported by the Air Force Real Property Agency as being 20 acres of land and three acres of easement.

The base has been slated for closure by the Department of Defense, with its military mission transferring to Vandenberg Air Force Base in Lompoc (Santa Barbara County). According to Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) statutes, September 15, 2011 is the date by which Onizuka AFS closure and realignment must be completed. Onizuka AFS property is still currently owned and operated by the Department of Defense.

On April 6, 2006 the Department of Defense, through the Office of Economic Adjustment, formally recognized the City of Sunnyvale as the LRA for planning the redevelopment of Onizuka AFS. While serving as the LRA Sunnyvale City Council will fulfill a number of important responsibilities, including the following:

- Serve as the single community point of contact for all matters relating to the closure of the base;
- Serve as the single entity responsible for preparing the Onizuka AFS Reuse Plan;

- Serve as the primary agency for all grant/aid applications related to transition, reuse and redevelopment;
- Serve as support for regulatory agency responsible for environmental remediation and other environmental assessments;
- Facilitate community input and involvement in decision making related to reuse and economic development at Onizuka AFS through establishment of a Citizen's Advisory Committee (CAC) representing diverse stakeholders within the City and the region;
- Evaluate homeless needs in the City of Sunnyvale and balance those needs with other community development objectives during the reuse planning process;
- Negotiate the final plan for disposition of Onizuka AFS with the U.S. Air Force;

The LRA was formed in April 2006 and its first action item was to review and take a position on an expression of interest in part of the Onizuka property. Under the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process, other federal agencies are given an opportunity to express an interest in reusing government sites, before the property is declared surplus property to be disposed of with the assistance of the LRA. The U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs (VA) has notified DOD that it has an interest in using part of the Onizuka site; and on May 15, 2006, the DOD granted the VA's request. Although the LRA has the right to comment on the VA's proposal, it has no ability to prevent the transfer of a portion of the Onizuka AFS property to the VA.

The LRA's second step was to establish the Citizen's Advisory Committee (CAC). The CAC is comprised of members of the public who represent varied interested parties and stakeholders, in order to provide the broadest possible scope of comments. Public hearings will be held to give members of the community an opportunity to offer their suggestions as to how the site should be redeveloped.

As part of this base closure process, Onizuka is analyzed by the LRA and CAC for a number of issues, including the potential historic significance of the property. The Heritage Preservation Commission is functioning as the historic focus group for purposes of making a recommendation to the LRA on reuse and preservation of the base.

By fall 2007, the LRA will have received all input from the CAC and will have developed a reuse plan which will be submitted to DOD. The DOD will then have one year – until fall 2008 – to issue a formal record of decision which will describe how the base will be transferred. See Attachment A for additional BRAC facts.

**EXISTING POLICY*****The Heritage Preservation Sub-Element***

*Goal 6.3B:* To enhance, preserve, and protect Sunnyvale's heritage, including natural features, the build environment, and significant artifacts.

*Policy 6.3B.5:* Seek out, catalog, and evaluate heritage resources which may be significant.

*Action Statement 6.3B.5C:* Identify trees, sites, and artifacts which should be considered for cultural resource (heritage resource) status.

**Reuse Plan**

The Reuse Plan will serve as an important consideration for the Air Force's Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) which will include the Department of Defense Record of Decision (ROD) describing how Onizuka AFS will be transferred. Preparation of the Reuse Plan directly impacts the disposition of the property which is the primary objective of the Base Realignment and Closure process. The Reuse Plan is the primary planning document that will establish the community's vision for the conversion of the base from military to civilian use. The Reuse Plan will be prepared by the Sunnyvale City Council, serving as the LRA. The overall approach of the City as it pursues the reuse planning process will be to keep the public informed and solicit input in order to develop a Reuse Plan that reflects local and regional desires.

**DISCUSSION**

**Site Context:** The site contains 24 buildings totaling approximately 570,000 square feet of floor area. The largest of these buildings, anecdotally referred to as the "blue cube" due to its color and shape, is visible from US 101 and Highway 237. The site also contains several large antennas, which are prominent features of the site. The site activities correlate to the base mission of supporting military space projects. These activities are discussed further in this report.

**HPC's Role:** The Heritage Preservation Commission role in the BRAC process is to make a recommendation to the LRA regarding the potential historic significance of the base. The HPC's recommendation, anticipated in January 2007, will not be a formal determination of Federal, state, or local significance of Onizuka AFS, but will be a recommendation only. The LRA will review the HPC's recommendation in early 2007 and make the final recommendation to the DOD on the historic significance of Onizuka as part of the Reuse Plan.

This report is based on a detailed environmental survey or analysis of the base. A more detailed review of the historic significance of the base may be

completed by the Air Force during the BRAC process after 2008, or it may be completed by the City in 2007 as part of the LRA's Reuse Plan process.

**Air Force Environmental Study:** The Air Force has made a preliminary indication, under their survey of the Environmental Conditions of the Property report, that Onizuka AFS does not have any historic significance. It is unclear at this time how this determination was reached or if this is the final assessment by the Air Force. See Attachment E – Air Force Conditions Report.

**Staff Analysis:** Based on the lack of information in the Air Force's preliminary Environmental Conditions of the Property report, staff consulted a number of primary and secondary sources of information relating to the History of Onizuka AFS to gain a better insight on the history of the base. These sources include: Air Force and NASA official history documents, books from past personnel of Onizuka, internet research, interviews with Air Force personnel, and a physical tour of the base.

The following is a very brief summary of the activities and events found by staff to have occurred at the base or affected the history of the base. For a more detailed timeline, see Attachment C.

#### **KEY DATES:**

**1960-1972:** Discovery and Corona mission operations.

**1960-1980's:** Exclusive satellite control center for all military satellites, international communications, space operations, space shuttle, and NASA communications.

**1977:** Air Force Satellite Control Facility (former name of Onizuka) command functions officially transferred to Sunnyvale AFS from Space Divisions in Los Angeles.

**1986:** Air Force Satellite Control Facility renamed to Onizuka AFS after Space Shuttle Challenger explosion (in honor of Lt. Ellison S. Onizuka);

**1995:** BRAC directs realignment; most but not all missions transferred to Falcon Air Force Base in Colorado.

**2005:** Onizuka Air Force Station is scheduled for closure by DOD Order (closure final by 2011); ending 36 years of space and satellite support. Duties to be transferred to Vandenberg Air Force Base in Santa Barbara County.

#### **KEY FACTS AND EVENTS:**

- The Onizuka team supported the first orbital flight of Space Shuttle (1981), and every Shuttle Mission to date (1980-2004 - *Prime Mission Examples: Magellan, Galileo, Ulysses, Hubble Space Telescope, Mars Pathfinder*).

- Satellite Control Facility duties included responsibility for all communications/control of space satellites. Onizuka was also responsible for network management for getting the information back from the satellite to processing centers in the U.S.
- Onizuka AFS is the primary military communications facility; no other comparable backup facility exists for 30 years.
- Corona program captured some of the first photographs providing irrefutable evidence that the Soviet Union had placed nuclear missiles in Cuba (*Cuban Missile Crisis – 1962*).
- Satellite photos (“*Keyhole*” *spy satellite*) used as evidence which led to U.S. thwarting rumored attack by Libya on the Sudan (1983).

**SIGNIFICANT EVENT: CORONA PROGRAM**

- First photoreconnaissance satellite
- First photos of the earth from space
- First mapping of earth from space
- First stereo-optical data from space
- First recovery of a man-made object from space
- First mid-air recovery of a vehicle returning from space
- Quantum advancements in photo-imaging from space

**Historic Evaluation for Local Significance:** While making a recommendation on the potential historic significance of Onizuka AFS, it is important to keep in mind the City’s criteria for reviewing and determining historic significance.

The City’s Municipal Code, Title 19 (Zoning Ordinance) which provides the criteria for nomination of a City Heritage Resource or Local Landmark states the following:

Sunnyvale Municipal Code Section 19.96.050:

“Any improvement, building, portion of buildings, structures, signs, features, sites, scenic areas, views, vistas, places, areas, landscapes, trees, or other natural objects or objects of scientific, aesthetic, educational, political, social, cultural, architectural, or historical significance can be designated a heritage resource by the city council and any area within the city may be designated a heritage resource district by the city council pursuant to provisions of this chapter if it meets the Criteria of the National Register of Historic Places, or one or more of the following:

- (a) It exemplifies or reflects special elements of the city's cultural, social, economic, political, aesthetic engineering, architectural, or natural history;
- (b) It is identified with persons or events significant in local, state, or national history;

- (c) It embodies distinctive characteristics of a style, type, period, or method of construction, or is a valuable example of the use of indigenous materials or craftsmanship;
- (d) It is representative of the work of a notable builder, designer, or architect;
- (e) It contributes to the significance of an historic area, being a geographically definable area possessing a concentration of historic or scenic properties or thematically related grouping of properties which contribute to each other and are unified aesthetically or by plan or physical development;
- (f) It has a unique location or singular physical characteristic or is a view or vista representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the city of Sunnyvale;
- (g) It embodies elements of architectural design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship that represents a significant structural or architectural achievement or innovation;
- (h) It is similar to other distinctive properties, sites, areas, or objects based on a historic, cultural, or architectural motif;
- (i) It reflects significant geographical patterns, including those associated with different eras of settlement and growth, particular transportation modes, or distinctive examples of park or community planning;
- (j) It is one of the few remaining examples in the city, region, state, or nation possessing distinguishing characteristics of an architectural or historic type or specimen;
- (k) With respect to a local landmark, it is significant in that the resource materially benefits the historical character of a neighborhood or area, or the resource in its location represents an established and familiar visual feature of the community or city;
- (l) With respect to a local landmark district, a collective high integrity of the district is essential to the sustained value of the separate individual resources;
- (m) With respect to a designated landmark and designated landmark district, the heritage resource shall meet Criteria of the National Register of Historical Places, which are incorporated by reference into this chapter. (Ord. 2623-99 § 1 (part): prior zoning code § 19.80.060)."

**Historic Evaluation for National and State Significance:** The National Register's standards for evaluating the significance of properties were developed to recognize the accomplishments of all peoples who have made a significant contribution to our country's history and heritage. The criteria are designed to guide state and local governments, Federal agencies, and others in evaluating potential entries in the National Register. The criteria include the significance in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture that is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that

possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

National Register's standards:

- A.** That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
- B.** That are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or
- C.** That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction (i.e. a structure or its designers may be notable); or
- D.** That have yielded or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Activities and Events:**

Onizuka supported the Corona and space shuttle programs which were both significant military activities. These two programs were seminal missions for the US military and NASA and both had a respective impact on world history. The programs were operated or controlled exclusively from Onizuka AFS although the command, or decision making, was directed from off site (Washington D.C.).

**Architecture, Structures, Engineering, and Artifacts:**

Upon initial review of the architecture, there does not appear to be any historic significance in the physical buildings on site. The architecture of the buildings is of a plain, industrial architecture with nondescript exterior features. The building interiors are equally unimportant architecturally. The primary building, the "blue cube," could be considered one of Sunnyvale's visual landmarks due to its significant visual presence in the City. This significance is due to its size, color, and location adjacent to two major freeways in the City. The significance is not due to the architectural design, date of construction, or noted architect. Generally speaking, the buildings on the base would not likely qualify as locally significant under SMC criteria (c), (d), (g), and (j); however the "blue cube" may qualify under local criteria (k) since it represents an established and familiar visual feature of the community.

There are also three large antenna dishes at the site that could be considered significant visual landmarks in Sunnyvale. Preservation of at least one of these antennas could be desirable for three reasons: 1) they are visually significant and identifiable features of the base, 2) they are directly associated with the potentially significant events that occurred at the base, and 3) they are significant artifacts. Staff believes the antennas could qualify as locally significant under a number of the SMC criteria, including criteria (k) as familiar visual features of the community. Unfortunately, preservation of the dishes is

not a feasible option at this time. A representative of the Air Force stated that the antennas are still in full operation and will either be moved to Vandenberg AFB by 2011 or sold to a private party, along with other equipment on the base, prior to the base closure.

Other significant artifacts associated with the base (computers, machines, etc.) have already been removed from the site. They are either in storage at Schriever AFS in Colorado or are on display at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C.

**Prehistory and Significant Persons:**

During the course of staff's research it was found that Vice President Hubert Humphrey was the only person of national standing to have visited the site. The purpose of the visit is not fully known at this time, but it is believed to have been of a ceremonial nature only and not in a command capacity.

Although the Ohlone Indians were known to have settled areas throughout the Silicon Valley, there is no direct evidence at this time indicating they had a significant presence at the current site of the base.

**Potential Next Steps:** If the LRA determines that preservation of the historic significance of the property is appropriate, there are several courses of action that can be pursued:

1. The LRA can apply for funding from the Office of Economic Adjustment (DOD) to complete an intensive historic analysis in 2007 (previously \$10,000 was requested but rejected with a note that reapplication could be made if information suggests further analysis should be pursued).

This approach might result in a delay in the completion of the Reuse Plan, although it is anticipated the analysis can be completed by the September 1, 2007 Reuse Plan's due date. It is expected to take three months time to receive word on whether funding is available and if awarded, three months time to complete the study. Estimated cost is less than \$10,000 to hire a consultant.

2. The LRA can front the costs of a study to complete an intensive historic analysis, requesting reimbursement from the DOD after the analysis has been started or completed.

This approach will not likely delay the completion of the Reuse Plan, since less time is needed to start the study. One risk is the reimbursement request may be rejected by the DOD.

3. The LRA could develop a Reuse Plan that includes historic mitigation. The plan could require a commemorative element on the site such as an



indoor exhibit, outdoor memorial area plaque, inclusion of a memorial at a local museum (including appropriate historical artifacts), or preservation of a building on site.

This approach would allow the LRA to specify what mitigation is necessary as part of the Reuse Plan and what items can be deleted from the plan. For example, the LRA could determine that an outdoor memorial is appropriate for preservation of the site but the existing buildings have no historic value and can be redeveloped. Because the buildings were constructed to ensure maximum security, the windowless buildings may not be desirable to other users. Alternatively, preservation of the Space Place social building, while not distinctive architecturally, is an example of a building that might be preserved. This approach would rely on the DOD (or possibly a future user of the site) to complete the intensive historic analysis and recommended mitigation. One risk is the DOD could still determine it is not necessary to complete any further historic analysis for the base reuse. No delay in the Reuse Plan would result with this approach.

### **FISCAL IMPACT**

There is no fiscal impact related to the reuse plan at this time.

### **CONCLUSION**

The BRAC process has been started for Onizuka AFS. As part of this process a preliminary assessment of the historic significance of the base must be made to the LRA, who will make the final recommendation to the DOD on reuse of the property. This report lists a number of key events and projects that occurred at Onizuka. The Corona and space shuttle programs are likely the most significant of the events to have occurred.

### **PUBLIC CONTACT**

This report was included in the publication and posting of the Heritage Preservation Commission's agenda on the City's official notice bulletin board and the City's web page. This report was also made available at the Sunnyvale Public Library and City Clerk's Office.

### **ALTERNATIVES**

Recommend to the LRA, based on the adopted City criteria and known key events, that:

1. The LRA acknowledges the historic significance of the Onizuka AFS site and recommends that a commemorative element, such as a public outdoor memorial, interpretive feature, or plaque, should be created to preserve the site's heritage significance. This should be included as part of the LRA's Reuse Plan recommendation to the DOD. No further historical survey and analysis by the LRA is recommended at this time.

2. The LRA acknowledges the historic significance of the Onizuka AFS site and recommends that a building should be preserved to commemorate the site's heritage significance. This should be included as part of the LRA's Reuse Plan recommendation to the DOD. No further historical survey and analysis by the LRA is recommended at this time.
3. An intensive historical survey and analysis be completed by the LRA, prior to making the final Reuse Plan recommendation to the DOD, in order to determine potential historic resource or potential historic district status. This would be completed in accordance with state and Federal procedures, to determine if Onizuka AFS has Federal, state, and/or local historic significance and what level of preservation is appropriate. Funding for this option (approximately \$10,000) would need to be identified by the LRA in 2007.
4. The LRA finds that Onizuka AFS does not have Federal, state, and/or local historic significance and no further historic review or study should be completed.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

There is no recommendation at this time since this report is for information only. A recommendation to HPC will be made in January 2007.

Reviewed by:

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CC: Onizuka Local Redevelopment Authority  
Onizuka Local Redevelopment Authority Community Advisory Committee

Attachment:

- A. Onizuka AFS Fact Sheet
- B. Onizuka AFS Aerial Photo
- C. Detailed Timeline and List of Significant Missions at Onizuka
- D. Letter From Jack W. Rowe
- E. Air Force Conditions Report